

Lesson Unit 5: Non-Self

Learning Outcomes:

At the completion of the lesson, the students will be able to

- Explain non-self as the third of the three characteristics of existence
- Explain the five aggregates of clinging and the six senses
- Explain the reality of life based on the original sources
- Quote from the discourses in defining non-self

Student Activities:

- Read each of the Readings carefully and underline/ highlight the key words and concepts in each reading.
- Draw a mind-map around the main topic linking the key words and concepts that you underlined or highlighted in the readings showing their relationship to the main topic and also to each other
- Read the given original sources to be familiar with the texts

For your journal entries, write detailed accounts on the following: *tilakkhana*, *anatta*, *atta*, five aggregates, sense faculties.

Reading 1: Who Am I? Why I Say: My, Mine

Buddha is awakened one. He taught that one's personal awakening leads to the awakening of one's family, company, village, country, and finally to the awakening of the world. These awakenings occur synchronically, each encouraging and reinforcing the other. Awakening of total human personality leads to the awakening of everybody. With the effort of the individual as well as with help from others the society could be awakened. Social change requires personal change.

Satta means attached being – one who has attached to oneself or the five aggregates.

Atta is self in other religions who teach that there is an unchanging and eternal thing inside us. The world changes but the soul does not change. The Soul is the doer and enjoyer of all one's deeds.

Anatta is no-self in Buddhism. Five Aggregates of clinging: Form, Feeling, Perceptions, Formations, and Consciousness are without a self. They are not Self and do not stand in relation to a Self. They are not Self because they are impermanent, composite, conditioned, not subject to complete control. The sound of the lute is a product of the coming together of many parts of the lute and the effort of the musician.

There are four perversions: to take foul to be beautiful, non-pleasurable to be pleasurable, impermanent to be permanent, Self-less to be Self.

Six Senses and Sense Objects are not Self.

Non-Restraint of the six senses are given in a simile: There are six animals belonging to different domains and feeding grounds – each tied with a separate rope and all these six ropes tied together. Each animal pulls towards their feeding ground. Just like this, each sense pulls towards its own sensual objects.

1. Eye goes after agreeable forms = a snake pulls in the direction of an anthill;
2. ear pulls towards agreeable sounds = a crocodile pulls in the direction of water;

3. nose pulls towards agreeable odors = a bird pulls to fly in the sky;
4. tongue pulls towards agreeable taste = a dog pulls to enter a village;
5. body – pulls towards agreeable touch = a jackal pulls to go towards a charnel ground;
6. mind pulls towards agreeable mental phenomena = a monkey pulls to go into the forest.

One must restrain the six senses as these six animals are tied to a post. The post is the mindfulness directed to the body.

There is an anxiety – fear of No-soul in the worldly person (MN – Sutta no. 22).

“Here someone holds the view: ‘The world is Self; and when I have departed I shall be permanent, enduring, eternal, not having the nature of change; and like this I shall remain for ever and ever.’ He listens to the teaching for the destroying of all tendencies to wrong views, assertions, obsessions, and insurances, for the calming of all determinations, for the relinquishing of all foundations, for the destroying of all craving, for the fading out, for cessation, for extinction. It occurs to him thus: ‘I shall surely be annihilated! I shall surely perish! I shall surely be no more! He sorrows, is distressed, and laments, and beating his breast and bewildering, he falls into confusion. Thus indeed there is anxiety about subjective absence.

Belief in a Soul is the root of all notions of I, my, mine, lust, hatred, and delusion, pride, and I-ness. It is the source of all wars, personal conflicts, ethnic cleansing. It is the source of all human calamities and dangers. Self-protection and self-establishment are two notions rooted in humans. For self-protection – we have created God. (“Trust God but tie your camel tight!”). For self-establishment – we have created Soul.

Selfishness comes from the belief in self. Greed and aggression are spontaneous innate drives. The ‘I’ feeling or self-expansion makes one aggressive. After obtaining our desired objects we soon look for other objects to attain. The Buddha once, out of compassion, attempted to save a person from hell by using a spider’s thread. However, the person generated selfish thoughts and behaviors while climbing up the thread as he thought that if others hold the thread he will not be able to climb up. Again, he fell down to hell due to his selfish thoughts.

“Now what do you think, Kālamas, when greed (hatred, delusion) arises within a person, does it arise to his benefit or harm?” “To his harm, Sir.” “Now, Kālamas, when a man is greedy, is overcome by greed, when his mind is completely swayed by greed, does he not kill a living creature, take what is not given, commit adultery, tell lies, and induce others too to commit deeds that would conduce to disadvantage and unhappiness for a long time?” “He does, Sir.”

We often go after our own mind. When we see a house as beautiful, we are projecting our concepts onto objects and seeing part of our mind in the object. When we go after beautiful objects, we are going after our own mind. A giant spider appeared during one’s meditation and started to bother him much. The Master asked this student to draw a circle with a brush on the spider’s body when it appeared next time. The student did as he was told and the circle-mark was found in the student’s own belly.

Our sensual desires are only our attachments to concepts. That is why the whole process of sensual experiences can be effectively executed in a dream, with entirely satisfactory results.

Growing Self and Satisfying it. Sitting in a stationary train, if we look at a moving train, we see our train as moving. Likewise, in relation to the conceptual projections we make on to the external world, we tend to see an ‘I’. If we stop these conceptual projections, the ‘I’ will vanish instantly. The self grows by identifying itself with things. First, the self identifies itself with the

body, then with other objects like one's car. The more one desires and obtains, the more the self grows. As the self grows bigger, one wants to achieve bigger and bigger things to satisfy the growing self. ... as one achieves more and more possessions, one has to suffer more and more. Once you have a desire to go to a particular place, that desire will no longer be there once you have arrived at that place. Once you have realized that there is no person called 'I', your greed, hatred, and conceit will dissolve themselves automatically.

High cost of living is the cost of living high. Pleasure is great, the regret is greater (*ādinavo ettha bhiyyo*). Pleasures are manifold and sweet (tasty) (Sn 50). Craving at psychological level is root of unhappiness. Craving at cosmic level is the cause of rebirth.

Emotional attractions between the sexes are natural (A IV, 57-58) but they tie us to the cycle of birth and death. "A man ponders over the masculinity in him, ponders over his masculine behavior, attire, ways, impulses, voice and charm. He gets impassioned with masculinity and finds delight therein. Thus impassioned and delighted he ponders on femininity outside, and ponders over feminine behavior, attire, ways, impulses, voice and charm. He gets impassioned and delighted therein. Being thus impassioned and delighted he wishes for external union and longs for the pleasure and joy resulting from such union. Being in love with his own sex (masculinity) he goes into union with woman. Thus he has not gone beyond his own masculinity." "A woman ponders over the femininity in herself, ponders over her feminine behavior, attire, ways, impulses, voice and charm. She gets impassioned with femininity and finds delight therein. Thus impassioned and delighted she ponders on masculinity outside, and ponders over masculine behavior, attire, ways, impulses, voice and charm. She gets impassioned and delighted therein. Being thus impassioned and delighted she wishes for external union and longs for the pleasure and joy resulting from such union. Being in love with her own sex (femininity) she goes into union with man. Thus she has not gone beyond her own femininity."

Three Characteristics of Existence are: *Anicca* – changing nature – gives rise to detachment; detachment weakens one's greed. *Dukkha* – unsatisfactory nature – gives birth to compassion; compassion generates generosity. *Anatta* – relative nature – expels self-delusion and egotism (one's ignorance); gives rise to wisdom; wisdom to peace and harmony.

Notes for reflection

Who Am I? Why I Say: My, Mine

- Buddha = awakened one

One's personal awakening > the awakening of one's family > company > village > country > the awakening of the world = these awakenings occur synchronically, each encouraging and reinforcing the other

Awakening of total human personality > Awakening of everybody - With the effort of the individual as well as with help from others = Social change requires personal change

Satta = attached being – one who attached to oneself or the five aggregates

- Atta = Self in other religions
 - There is an unchanging and eternal thing inside us
 - The world changes but the soul does not change

The Soul is the doer and enjoyer of all one's deeds

Anatta = No-Self in Buddhism

- Five Aggregates of Clinging: Form, Feeling, Perceptions, Formations, Consciousness
- They are not Self and do not stand in relation to a Self
- They are not Self because they are impermanent, composite, conditioned, not subject to complete control
- The sound of the lute is a product of the coming together of many parts of the lute and the effort of the musician

Four perversions = taking foul to be beautiful, non-pleasurable to be pleasurable, impermanent to be permanent, Self-less to be Self

- Six Senses and Sense Objects are not Self
 - Non-Restraint of the six senses: The simile of the six animals of different domains and feeding grounds – each tied with a separate rope and all these six ropes are tied together and letting them go.
 - eye – agreeable forms = a snake pulls > to an anthill
 - ear – agreeable sounds = a crocodile pulls > to water
 - nose – agreeable odors = a bird pulls > to fly in the sky
 - tongue – agreeable taste = a dog pulls > to a village
 - body – agreeable touch = a jackal pulls > to a charnel ground
 - mind – agreeable mental phenomena = a monkey pulls > to the forest

Restraint of the six senses: these six animals are tied to a post – the post is the mindfulness directed to the body

- Anxiety – Fear of No-soul (MN – Sutta no. 22)
 - "Here someone holds the view: 'The world is Self; and when I have departed I shall be permanent, enduring, eternal, not having the nature of change; and like this I shall remain for ever and ever.'
 - He listens to the teaching for the destroying of all tendencies to wrong views, assertions, obsessions, and insistences, for the calming of all determinations, for the relinquishing of all foundations, for the destroying of all craving, for the fading out, for cessation, for extinction.
 - It occurs to him thus: 'I shall surely be annihilated! I shall surely perish! I shall surely be no more! He sorrows, is distressed, and laments, and beating his breast and bewildering, he falls into confusion.

Thus indeed there is anxiety about subjective absence.

Belief in a Soul

- Root of all notions of I, my, mine, lust, hatred, and delusion, pride, and I-ness
- Source of all wars, personal conflicts, ethnic cleansing

Source of all human calamities and dangers

Self-protection and self-establishment are two notions rooted in humans

- For self-protection – we have created God. ("Trust God but tie your camel tight!")

For self-establishment – we have created Soul

Selfishness

- Greed and aggression are spontaneous innate drives
- The 'I' feeling or self-expansion makes one aggressive
- After obtaining our desired objects we soon look for other objects to attain
- Story = The Buddha once, out of compassion, attempted to save a person from hell by using a spider's thread. However, the person generated selfish thoughts and behaviors while climbing up the thread. Again, he fell down to hell.

"Now what do you think, Kālamas, when greed (hatred, delusion) arises within a person, does it arise to his benefit or harm?" "To his harm, Sir." "Now, Kālamas, when a man is greedy, is overcome by greed, when his mind is completely swayed by greed, does he not kill a living creature, take what is not given, commit adultery, tell lies, and induce others too to commit deeds that would conduce to disadvantage and unhappiness for a long time?" "He does, Sir."

Going after our own mind

- When we see a house as beautiful, we are projecting our concepts onto objects and seeing part of our mind in the object. When we go after beautiful objects, we are going after our own mind.
- A giant spider appeared during one's meditation and started to bother him much. The Master asked this student to draw a circle with a brush on the spider's body when it appeared next time. The student did as he was told and the circle-mark was found in the student's own belly.

Our sensual desires are only our attachments to concepts. That is why the whole process of sensual experiences can be effectively executed in a dream, with entirely satisfactory results.

Growing Self and Satisfying it

- Sitting in a stationary train, if we look at a moving train, we see our train as moving. Likewise, in relation to the conceptual projections we make on to the external world, we tend to see an 'I'. If we stop these conceptual projections, the 'I' will vanish instantly.
- The self grows by identifying itself with things. First, the self identifies itself with the body, then with other objects like one's car.
- The more one desires and obtains, the more the self grows. As the self grows bigger, one wants to achieve bigger and bigger things to satisfy the growing self. ... as one achieves more and more possessions, one has to suffer more and more.
- Once you have a desire to go to a particular place, that desire will no longer be there once you have arrived at that place. Once you have realized that there is no person called 'I', your greed, hatred, and conceit will dissolve themselves automatically.

High cost of living = the cost of living high

Sensual Pleasure

- Pleasure is great, the regret is greater (*ādīnavo ettha bhiyyo*)
- Pleasures are manifold and sweet (tasty) (Sn 50)
- Craving at psychological level = root of unhappiness

Craving at cosmic level = cause of rebirth

Emotional attractions between the sexes (A IV, 57-58)

"A man ponders over the masculinity in himself, ponders over his masculine behavior, attire, ways, impulses, voice and charm. He gets impassioned with masculinity and finds delight therein. Thus impassioned and delighted he ponders on femininity outside, and ponders over feminine behavior, attire, ways, impulses, voice and charm. He gets impassioned and delighted therein. Being thus impassioned and delighted he wishes for external union and longs for the pleasure and joy resulting from such union. Being in love with his own sex (masculinity) he goes into union with woman. Thus he has not gone beyond his own masculinity."

"A woman ponders over the femininity in herself, ponders over her feminine behavior, attire, ways, impulses, voice and charm. She gets impassioned with femininity and finds delight therein. Thus impassioned and delighted she ponders on masculinity outside, and ponders over masculine behavior, attire, ways, impulses, voice and charm. She gets impassioned and delighted therein. Being thus impassioned and delighted she wishes for external union and longs for the pleasure and joy resulting from such union. Being in love with her own sex (femininity) she goes into union with man. Thus she has not gone beyond her own femininity."

Three Characteristics of Existence

- *Anicca* – changing nature – gives rise to detachment; detachment weakens one's greed.
- *Dukkha* – unsatisfactory nature – gives birth to compassion; compassion generates generosity.
- *Anatta* – relative nature – expels self-delusion and egotism (one's ignorance); gives rise to wisdom; wisdom to peace and harmony.

Reading 2: The Five Aggregates and the Teaching of No-Self

The doctrine of no-self is one of the most basic teachings in Buddhism. It refers to the Buddhist position that no person has a real, permanent, and substantial Self. It does not deny, however, that people have selves or identities in the conventional sense of the word. When these selves are viewed correctly they will be seen to develop and change. The ordinary person, however, views at least part of himself as unchanging and thus posits the existence of a permanent Self and clings to this imagined Self. Because he clings to this Self, he suffers in various ways. Yet, if the ordinary person viewed phenomena correctly, he would find no permanent Self.

In Early Buddhism, the body and mind are analyzed into five groups or aggregates (*khandha*) to demonstrate the teaching of no-Self. The five aggregates are form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedana*), perception (*sanna*), mental formations (*sankhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Form refers to

things with form and color, particularly the body. Sensations or sense-impressions are classified into three groups: pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Perceptions are the forming of mental images or representations. Mental formations refer to the power of mental formation. In this case, it refers specifically to the functioning of volition or the will. Consciousness refers to the functions of recognition and judgment.

Because a person is composed of these five constantly changing aggregates, his self is impermanent (*anicca*). If a person clings to the false view of an unchanging Self, he will inevitably suffer. Thus impermanent things are said to be or lead to suffering (*dukkha*). If a permanent Self did exist, it would not be something that suffered or led to suffering, since permanent entities exist in complete freedom and thus have nothing to do with suffering. Thus the very fact of suffering indicates that a person does not have a Self. (If the Self or *atman* existed, according to Buddhism, it would have the characteristics of being eternal, independent, the central element in the personality, and the controller of actions.) The Buddhist scriptures include statements such as: "A particular thing is not one's Self (when it can be said that) this thing is not mine (*mama*), I (*aham*) am not this thing, or this thing is not my Self. Things should be viewed with correct wisdom, just as they are." According to the doctrine of no-Self, the personality is in a state of flux. However, the teaching of no-Self is not nihilistic. According to the Suttanipata (vv. 858, 919), both clinging to the idea of the absence of Self (*niratta*) and clinging to the idea of a permanent Self (*atta*) are errors.

Eventually, the first aggregate, form, was interpreted as including all material things. Consequently, all impermanent phenomena were encompassed within the doctrine of the five aggregates. Such impermanent phenomena were called conditioned dhammas (*sankhata-dhamma*) and were contrasted with unchanging or eternal existents, which were called unconditioned dhammas (*asankhata-dhamma*). Both Nibbāna and space were considered to be unconditioned dhammas. This fundamental classification of dhammas into conditioned and unconditioned categories is found in the Nikāyas.

Reading from the Original Sources

Anxiety Due to Change

"Monks, I will teach you agitation through clinging and non-agitation through nonclinging." Listen and attend carefully. I shall speak."

"Yes, venerable sir," those monks replied. The Blessed One said this:

"And how, monks, is there agitation through clinging? Here, monks, the uninstructed worldling, who is not a seer of the noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who is not a seer of superior persons and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. That form of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of form, his consciousness becomes preoccupied with the change of form. Agitation and a constellation of mental states born of preoccupation with the change of form remain obsessing his mind. Because his mind is obsessed, he is frightened, distressed, and anxious, and through changing he becomes agitated.

He regards feeling as self ... perception as self ... volitional formations as self ... consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That consciousness of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of consciousness, his consciousness becomes preoccupied with the change of consciousness. Agitation and a constellation of mental states born of preoccupation with the change of

consciousness remain obsessing his mind. Because his mind is obsessed, he is frightened, distressed, and anxious, and through changing he becomes agitated.

"It is in such a way, monks, that there is agitation through clinging.

"And how, monks, is there non-agitation through nonclinging? Here, monks, the instructed noble disciple, who is a seer of the noble ones and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, who is a seer of superior persons and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, does not regard form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. That form of his changes and alters. Despite the change and alteration of form, his consciousness does not become preoccupied with the change of form. No agitation and constellation of mental states born of preoccupation with the change of form remain obsessing his mind. Because his mind is not obsessed, he is not frightened, distressed, or anxious, and through nonclinging he does not become agitated.

He does not regard feeling as self ... perception as self ... volitional formations as self ... consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That consciousness of his changes and alters. Despite the change and alteration of consciousness, his consciousness does not become preoccupied with the change of consciousness. No agitation and constellation of mental states born of preoccupation with the change of consciousness remain obsessing his mind. Because his mind is not obsessed, he is not frightened, distressed, or anxious, and through nonclinging he does not become agitated.

"It is in such a way, monks, that there is non-agitation through non-clinging. (SN III, 15-18)

Reading 3: Upanishadic Notion of Atman and Brahman

Atman

- The word originated from a word meaning "to breathe" and came to mean
 - Something breathing, something with life, individual
 - Something existing in the depths of life, i.e., soul, something with spirit
 - Self, individual self
 - Substance of self

The substance of all things, their reality

- Human body perishes at death but its soul is imperishable.
- In the Upanishads, Atman was regarded in the same light as Brahman; Atman the individual self, Brahman the universal fundamental principle.
- Atman and Brahman
- Atman and Brahman came to be regarded as one; *brahmātmaikyam* = Atman's oneness with Brahman was established.
- Brahman = universal, objective principle; neutral principle
- Atman = the individual, subjective principle; the personal principle
- The key subject of the Upanishads = the identity of Brahman and Atman
- The truth of all things = Brahman = all things we experience
- This very Brahman is
 - Satyasya satyam = truth in the truth
 - The doer of all things who, having every and all desires, is able to materialize itself as it desires.
 - This Brahman can be regarded as our original self
 - This Brahman is also called Atman in the heart (Atmāntarhṛdaye)

- Infinite and infinitesimal
- Smaller than a grain of rice and wheat or a poppy seed and greater than the earth, skies and heaven (Chandogya II, 14, 3).
- The true knowledge is to realize that Atman, which is our individual self, is identical with Brahman, which is the universal principle. The acquisition of this realization is Moksha (emancipation).
- Yajnavalkya says: "All things are dear, not because I love all things, but because I love Atman" (Brhadaranyaka II 4,5)
- = the existence of all things is no other than Atman, to love something is to love Atman which is the substance of it, and not because it is beautiful.
- Yajnavalkya asserts: If such Atman is seen, heard, and recognized, all things are known.
- He tries to grasp Atman subjectively and calls it Antaryāmin, immanent dominator.
- "Atman is immanent dominator, is immortal and controls all the existing things from their inside" (Brhadaranyaka III 17,15)
- "It is that which sees and is not seen, hears and is not heard, thinks and is not thought, recognizes and is not recognized" (Brahadaranyaka III 7, 23)
- Atman is the pure wisdom (*prajñāghana*) which can no longer be the object of recognition, something which cannot be grasped by a certain conception, in other words, it is the subject of recognition. It is something which no word can express and if one is forced to express it in words, there is no other way than doing so in negative expression, neti neti, not so, not so (Brhadaranyaka II, 3,6; III 9,26; IV 2, 4: IV 4,22; IV 5,15).
- Brahman is without any attributes or potencies whatever.
- The sense of the term Brahman changed totally – in the Rig-veda, it meant the magical potency of the mantra, but in the Upanishads Brahman is everything and nothing. It is the irreducible essence of everything in the world, but is nothing in particular. The Sarvasaropanisad, a late text, states that when time, space, substance and cause disappear, "then Brahman remains over."
- Inseparable from the concept of Brahman is the concept of Atman. Atman is the Brahman in ourselves. The conviction that the Brahman without and the Atman within are one and the same – that is the religion of the Upanishads.
- The terms Brahman and Atman are often used interchangeably in the Upanishads, for they are absolutely the same, with only a contextual difference between them. Coomaraswamy explains: "the identity of infinite space within the space in any closed vessel – shatter the bounding walls of the vessel ... and the identity of space is patent."
- Yajnavalkya flatly declares in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad that Atman is indeed Brahman.
- The Chandogya Upanishad elucidates the concept with a parable:

The sage Uddalaka Aruni to his son and disciple Svetaketu: "Fetch me a fig from the banyan tree over there."

Svetaketu: "Here it is, venerable sir."

Uddalaka: "cut it open."

Svetaketu: "Yes, venerable sir."

Uddalaka: "What do you see inside?"

Svetaketu: "These tiny seeds, venerable sir."

Uddalaka: "cut open one of them, my son."

Svetaketu: "Yes, venerable sir."

Uddalaka: "What do you see there?"

Svetaketu: "Nothing at all, venerable sir."

Uddalaka: "My son, that which you cannot see is the subtle essence of the tree, and it is from that very essence that this huge banyan tree grows ... In that subtle essence is the being of everything that exists. That is the Real. That is the Self. Tat tvam asi – that thou art, Svetaketu."

- Uddalaka later reinforced this lesson by having Svetaketu put a lump of salt in a pot of water one night, and asking him the next morning to take it out. But Svetaketu could not find the lump of salt in the pot, though when he sipped the water, as his father told him to do, it tasted of salt – the salt was indeed there, though he could not see it. Uddalaka then told him, "Here also, my dear, in this body, truly is the Self, though you do not perceive it. In that subtle essence is the being of everything that exists."
- Svetasvatara Upanishad states: "As oil in sesame, as butter in cream, as water in riverbeds, as fire in the fire-sticks, so is the Self to be grasped within the self."
- On the surface of everything in the world appears different from everything else, each marked by its own particularity, but the speculative imagination, as Oldenberg observes, "strives to pierce into the depths below, in which lies the unifying bond of all diversity. Man looks for the essence in things, and essence of the essence."
- But how do we define Brahman, the indefinable essence of the essence? Brahman is nirguna, without attributes, the Upanishads hold; it is pure consciousness, eternally changeless through waking and sleeping, through life and death and transmigration; it is both immanent and transcendent at the same time, within and outside everything Brahman is singularly, devoid of time and space, an absolute nothingness that contains the whole universe of matter and energy.
- Brahman is all that there is. But Brahman cannot be known objectively, because there is no reality outside Brahman, no 'other' to observe and know Brahman. Consciousness can exist only if there is duality, maintains Yajnavalkya. "How would you see the seers of seeing?" he asks. "How would you hear the hearer of hearing? ... How would you know the knower of knowing?" Evidently, Brahman can be known only in intuitive flashes.
- Advises the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: "Let a wise seeker, knowing Him bend his mind towards Him; let him not meditate on many words; these can but tire the voice."
- Words are weariness. Warns the Katha Upanishad: "Not through much learning is Atman reached, not through the intellect and sacred teaching."
- The Isa Upanishad regards conventional knowledge as worse than ignorance.
- Adds the Kena Upanishad: "He (Brahman) comes to the thought of those who know him beyond thought, not to those who imagine he can attained by thought. He is unknown to the learned and known to the simple."

- Words and images can only hint at what Brahman is, but not describe it, for any description would limit the Brahman and violate its essential limitless quality. "Words and mind go to him (Brahman), but reach him not and return," says the Taittiriya Upanishad.
- The Kena Upanishad wonders: "That to which no eye penetrates, nor speech, nor thought, which remains unknown, and we see it not, how can instruction therein be given to us?"
- The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad concludes that Brahman can be described only in negative terms: "This Self, it can only be described as Neyti! Neyti! – Not this! Not this! It is impalpable ... indestructible ... free from attachment ... unfettered."
- Centuries later, Sankara, the great Vedantic philosopher, would illustrate this point with a story --- when a disciple asked a sage about the nature of Brahman-Atman, the sage at first remained silent, but on being pressed, answered, "I teach you, indeed, but you understand not. Silence is the Atman." You cannot point out the air with a finger.
- The Upanishadic sages had difficulty in stating abstract ideas with precision, and often spoke allegorically. The results were not always happy, and there is much confusion in their attempts to define Brahman-Atman.
- Atman initially meant breath, not self. And, breath being considered irreducible essence of life, a link was sought to be established through it between Atman and Brahman by maintaining that all breaths come from the universal breath.
- The primacy of breath, according to the Kaushitaki Upanishad, was once demonstrated by the great god Prajapati when the various vital powers in man quarreled among themselves for supremacy and approached him to settle the dispute. Prajapati then asked the powers of speech, hearing, sight and mind to leave the body one after the other, but even after they all left, breath still remained. However, when breath left, all other faculties departed with it, proving that all else were dependent on breath.
- "Life is breath, breath is life," the Kaushitaki Upanishad states. "Now some say that bodily organs gravitate towards unity ... When the voice speaks, all the other organs speak along with it. When the eye sees, all the other organs see along with it. When the ear hears, all the other organs hear along with it. When the mind thinks, all the other organs think along with it. When the breath breathes, all other organs breathe along with it..."
- This is true, the Upanishad concedes, but goes on to maintain that there is nevertheless a hierarchy among the bodily functions, and that breath has supremacy over all else, because none of the other faculties can exist without breath.
- This proposition, that breath is Atman-Brahman, does not, however, find favor with Yajnavalkya in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.
- Elsewhere the claim of Om, the mystic syllable, to be considered as Brahman is examined but rejected.
- The general view of the Upanishads is that it is futile to attempt to define or describe the ineffable Atman-Brahman.
- Brahman certainly cannot be described in corporeal terms. Nevertheless, some Upanishads go on to furnish curious and possibly allegorical descriptions of the physical

properties of Atman-Brahman, conceiving it as a material but very small and subtle entity.

- The Svetasvatara Upanishad gives the size of the Atman variously as that of a thumb, a needlepoint, or the ten-thousandth part of the tip of a hair.
- The Atman, says the Chandogya Upanishad, resides in the heart and is "smaller than a grain of rice or a barely-corn, smaller than a mustard-seed or a grain of millet, or the kernel of a grain of millet ... and yet is greater than the earth ... greater than the sky, greater than all these worlds. All works, all desires, all scents, all tastes belong to it: it encompasses all this universe ... This my Self within the heart is that Brahman. When I depart from hence I shall merge with it."
- The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad maintains that there are 72,000 nerves called hita in man and that it is through them that the Atman spreads through his body.

States the Kena Upanishad: "Know this: The Atman is the master of the chariot, the chariot is the body, intellect the charioteer, mind the reins. The senses, they say, are the steeds ..."